

UNITED STATES PATENT APPLICATION

of

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for

**ESTABLISHING A SECURE CONNECTION
WITH A PRIVATE CORPORATE NETWORK
OVER A PUBLIC NETWORK**

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. The Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to the field of network communication. More specifically, the present invention relates to establishing a secure connection to a private corporate network over a public network without being restricted to communication through the private corporate network.

2. The Prior State of the Art

The Internet has transformed the way people communicate and do business. For example, electronic mail allows individuals to send electronic messages and attached documents world-wide in a matter of hours, minutes, or often even seconds. Information regarding an almost limitless amount of subjects may be retrieved from remote locations and presented to the user. Chat rooms and instant messaging allow individuals to electronically discuss various topics even though the participants are remotely located from each other.

In addition to the above forms of communication, it is often desirable for an authorized user of a private corporate network to obtain access to information in a private corporate network. For example, a user may typically use a client within a private corporate network, the corporate network being separated from the remainder of the Internet using a firewall or other security measures. That private corporate network may contain data that is interesting to the user such as documents, e-mails, and so forth. As the user travels, the user may desire to remotely access the data in the private corporate network using a client external to the private corporate network.

1 In order to access a private corporate network from outside of a private corporate
2 network, one must typically establish a connection over a public network, such as, for
3 example, the Internet. Since the data communicated between the private corporate network
4 and the client outside the private corporate network is often sensitive in nature, the link
5 over the public network should be secure so as to avoid eavesdropping.

6 One conventional protocol used to establish this secure connection over the public
7 network is called Point-to-Point Tunneling Protocol (PPTP). PPTP allows an external
8 client to establish a secure Virtual Private Network (VPN) link to a VPN access server
9 within the private corporate network so as to guard against eavesdropping by those in the
10 public network. Establishing a PPTP connection between a private corporate network and
11 an external client is an effective and secure way to allow the external client access to
12 resources within the private corporate network.

13 However, as long as the PPTP link is established using a communication device
14 such as a network card or modem, any communication from the communication device
15 must occur through the PPTP link. In a client that has only one active communication
16 device, this means that the while the PPTP link is active, the client can only communicate
17 through the PPTP link.

18 Thus, if the external client is to communicate with a Web site outside of the private
19 corporate network, the client must either discontinue the PPTP link or else submit requests
20 through the PPTP link to a VPN access server in the private corporate network (assuming
21 the external client only has one active communications device). The VPN access server
22 would supply the request to the proxy server in the private corporate network. The proxy
23 server would then establish a connection to the desired Web site.

24

1 In the sense that all communications from the external client to resources outside of
2 the private corporate network must pass through the proxy server of the private corporate
3 network, it is as though the external client is part of the private corporate network. Thus,
4 establishing a PPTP link to access a private corporate network restricts all communications
5 going to and from the client to the PPTP link. This introduces inefficiencies in routing and
6 causes the private corporate network to allocate memory and processing time to handling
7 such requests even though the desired resource and the external client are both outside of
8 the private corporate network.

9 In addition, however, the communications going out of the private corporate
10 network often open up the private corporate network to security breaches by individuals
11 analyzing outgoing messages from the private corporate network. The use of PPTP forces
12 communications from the communication device of the external client to pass through the
13 private corporate network and possibly back out to the public network thus unnecessarily
14 causing the private corporate network to establish communications outside of the private
15 corporate network.

16 What is therefore desired are ways of allowing outside clients to establish a
17 connection with their private corporate networks over a public network without restricting
18 the client to communication through the private corporate network.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention allows the communications device of clients that are external to a private corporate network to securely access the private corporate network. Conventional ways of making this connection force the communications device of the external client to communicate through the secure connection no matter what the ultimate desired resources. Thus, for example, if the external client desired to communicate with another resource external to the private corporate network while the secure connection was established, the external client would have to first direct the request through the secure connection to the private corporate network. The private corporate network would then route the request through its proxy server and send the request out to the desired external resource.

The present invention eliminates the requirement that requests from a single communications device of an external client always be directed through the private corporate network. This is accomplished by providing security to the connection with the private corporate network in such a way so as to preserve the ability of the communications device to establish yet other connections with other resources outside of the private corporate network. This is accomplished by using a protocol that operates at or above the logic layer that establishes connections (i.e., the socket layer) in the protocol stack. Examples of such protocols include the Secure Socket Layer (SSL) protocol and the Wireless Transport Layer Security (WTLS) protocol.

There are added advantages to using these protocols to secure a connection. For instance, if a connection is broken, these protocols can reestablish the connection without repeating all of the handshaking that occurred to establish the connection in the first place.

1 The protocols typically accommodate the caching of session state information such as
2 encryption keys so that future exchanges to retrieve such keys are not necessary when
3 reestablishing a previously established connection.

4 The method includes the external client establishing a connection with the private
5 corporate network over the public network using the communication device. This
6 connection may be established using, for example, Transmission Control Protocol (TCP).
7 The external client then provides security to the connection. This security is provided
8 using the established connection to exchange information such as certificates and
9 encryption keys. The security may be established by running, for example, the SSL
10 protocol over the TCP protocol. The external client maintains a session that uses the
11 secure connection to communicate with the private corporate network. During this
12 session, the communications device retains the ability to establish a separate and distinct
13 connection with another resource outside of the private corporate network. The
14 communications device then establishes a connection with the external resource.

15 Additional features and advantages of the invention will be set forth in the
16 description which follows, and in part will be obvious from the description, or may be
17 learned by the practice of the invention. The features and advantages of the invention may
18 be realized and obtained by means of the instruments and combinations particularly
19 pointed out in the appended claims. These and other features of the present invention will
20 become more fully apparent from the following description and appended claims, or may
21 be learned by the practice of the invention as set forth hereinafter.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

In order to describe the manner in which the above-recited and other advantages and features of the invention can be obtained, a more particular description of the invention briefly described above will be rendered by reference to specific embodiments thereof which are illustrated in the appended drawings. Understanding that these drawings depict only typical embodiments of the invention and are not therefore to be considered to be limiting of its scope, the invention will be described and explained with additional specificity and detail through the use of the accompanying drawings in which:

Figure 1 illustrates an exemplary system that provides a suitable operating environment for the present invention;

Figure 2 schematically illustrates a layered protocol stack that may be used to implement the principles of the present invention;

Figure 3 illustrates a suitable network architecture in which the present invention may be implemented; and

Figure 4 illustrates a flowchart of a method of establishing a secure connection to a private corporate network over a public network while retaining the ability to establish further connections in accordance with the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

In accordance with the present invention, a method and system are described for a client communications device to establish a secure connection over a public network with a server computer system in a private corporate network. This secure connection is established using a protocol that allows the network interface device to retain the ability to make further connections. For example, the network interface device may maintain a Secure Socket Layer (SSL) session with the server in the private corporate network while establishing a separate connection with Web sites on the Internet. This allows the client to access resources securely from the private corporate network while simultaneously accessing other resources in the public network.

This description defines certain terms that are to be applied throughout this description and the accompanying claims. These terms are provided in order to clearly claim the invention and describe embodiments thereof. The definitions of the terms may or may not reflect common usage of the terms. In this light, the definitions are not intended to be applied outside of this description and accompanying claims.

Embodiments within the scope of the present invention include computer-readable media for carrying or having computer-executable instructions or data structures stored thereon. Such computer-readable media can be any available media which can be accessed by a general purpose or special purpose computer. By way of example, and not limitation, such computer-readable media can comprise tangible computer-readable media such as RAM, ROM, EEPROM, CD-ROM or other optical disk storage, magnetic disk storage or other magnetic storage devices, or any other medium which can be used to carry or store desired program code means in the form of computer-executable instructions or data structures and which can be accessed by a general purpose or special purpose computer.

When information is transferred or provided over a network or another communications connection (either hardwired, wireless, or a combination of hardwired or wireless) to a computer, the computer properly views the connection as a computer-readable medium. Thus, any such a connection is properly termed a computer-readable medium. Combinations of the above should also be included within the scope of computer-readable media. Computer-executable instructions comprise, for example, instructions and data which cause a general purpose computer, special purpose computer, or special purpose processing device to perform a certain function or group of functions.

Figure 1 and the following discussion are intended to provide a brief, general description of a suitable computing environment in which the invention may be implemented. Although not required, the invention will be described in the general context of computer-executable instructions, such as program modules, being executed by computers in network environments. Generally, program modules include routines, programs, objects, components, data structures, etc. that perform particular tasks or implement particular abstract data types. Computer-executable instructions, associated data structures, and program modules represent examples of the program code means for executing steps of the methods disclosed herein. The particular sequence of such executable instructions or associated data structures represents examples of corresponding acts for implementing the functions described in such steps.

Those skilled in the art will appreciate that the invention may be practiced in network computing environments with many types of computer system configurations, including personal computers, hand-held devices, multi-processor systems, microprocessor-based or programmable consumer electronics, network PCs, minicomputers, mainframe computers, and the like. The invention may also be practiced

1 in distributed computing environments where tasks are performed by local and remote
2 processing devices that are linked (either by hardwired links, wireless links, or by a
3 combination of hardwired or wireless links) through a communications network. In a
4 distributed computing environment, program modules may be located in both local and
5 remote memory storage devices.

6 With reference to Figure 1, an exemplary system for implementing the invention
7 includes a general purpose computing device in the form of a conventional computer 120,
8 including a processing unit 121, a system memory 122, and a system bus 123 that couples
9 various system components including the system memory 122 to the processing unit 121.
10 The system bus 123 may be any of several types of bus structures including a memory bus
11 or memory controller, a peripheral bus, and a local bus using any of a variety of bus
12 architectures. The system memory includes read only memory (ROM) 124 and random
13 access memory (RAM) 125. A basic input/output system (BIOS) 126, containing the basic
14 routines that help transfer information between elements within the computer 120, such as
15 during start-up, may be stored in ROM 124.

16 The computer 120 may also include a magnetic hard disk drive 127 for reading
17 from and writing to a magnetic hard disk 139, a magnetic disk drive 128 for reading from
18 or writing to a removable magnetic disk 129, and an optical disk drive 130 for reading
19 from or writing to removable optical disk 131 such as a CD-ROM or other optical media.
20 The magnetic hard disk drive 127, magnetic disk drive 128, and optical disk drive 130 are
21 connected to the system bus 123 by a hard disk drive interface 132, a magnetic disk drive-
22 interface 133, and an optical drive interface 134, respectively. The drives and their
23 associated computer-readable media provide nonvolatile storage of computer-executable
24 instructions, data structures, program modules and other data for the computer 120.

1 Although the exemplary environment described herein employs a magnetic hard disk 139,
2 a removable magnetic disk 129 and a removable optical disk 131, other types of computer
3 readable media for storing data can be used, including magnetic cassettes, flash memory
4 cards, digital video disks, Bernoulli cartridges, RAMs, ROMs, and the like.

5 Program code means comprising one or more program modules may be stored on
6 the hard disk 139, magnetic disk 129, optical disk 131, ROM 124 or RAM 125, including
7 an operating system 135, one or more application programs 136, other program modules
8 137, and program data 138. A user may enter commands and information into the
9 computer 120 through keyboard 140, pointing device 142, or other input devices (not
10 shown), such as a microphone, joy stick, game pad, satellite dish, scanner, or the like.
11 These and other input devices are often connected to the processing unit 121 through a
12 serial port interface 46 coupled to system bus 123. Alternatively, the input devices may be
13 connected by other interfaces, such as a parallel port, a game port or a universal serial bus
14 (USB). A monitor 147 or another display device is also connected to system bus 123 via
15 an interface, such as video adapter 148. In addition to the monitor, personal computers
16 typically include other peripheral output devices (not shown), such as speakers and
17 printers.

18 The computer 120 may operate in a networked environment using logical
19 connections to one or more remote computers, such as remote computers 149a and 149b.
20 Remote computers 149a and 149b may each be another personal computer, a server, a
21 router, a network PC, a peer device or other common network node, and typically include
22 many or all of the elements described above relative to the computer 120, although only
23 memory storage devices 150a and 150b and their associated application programs 136a and
24 136b have been illustrated in Figure 1. The logical connections depicted in Figure 1

1 include a local area network (LAN) 151 and a wide area network (WAN) 152 that are
2 presented here by way of example and not limitation. Such networking environments are
3 commonplace in office-wide or enterprise-wide computer networks, intranets and the
4 Internet.

5 When used in a LAN networking environment, the computer 120 is connected to
6 the local network 151 through a network interface or adapter 153. When used in a WAN
7 networking environment, the computer 120 may include a modem 154, a wireless link, or
8 other means for establishing communications over the wide area network 152, such as the
9 Internet. The modem 154, which may be internal or external, is connected to the system
10 bus 123 via the serial port interface 146. In a networked environment, program modules
11 depicted relative to the computer 120, or portions thereof, may be stored in the remote
12 memory storage device. It will be appreciated that the network connections shown are
13 exemplary and other means of establishing communications over wide area network 152
14 may be used.

15 Figure 2 illustrates a layered software structure 200 or "protocol stack" that may be
16 used to communicate between an application program and a network 210. The protocol
17 stack 200 includes various layered modules 201 through 204 that are used to send and
18 receive data over the network 210. These modules 201 through 204 are an example of the
19 modules 137 made available to the computer 120 of Figure 1. Generally speaking, each
20 layer of the protocol stack performs certain functions that add onto the functionality
21 provided by lower layers. Briefly stated, an upper layer has the power to invoke the
22 services of a lower layer but does not know the details of how the lower layer will
23 accomplish the service. In contrast, a lower layer has no power to invoke the services of
24 upper layers.

1 The application layer 201 communicates directly with the application program such
2 as application program 136 that has a network communication function. Examples of such
3 application programs include Web browsers, file transfer applications, e-mail applications
4 and other such communication-oriented application programs. These application programs
5 typically receive data passed up the protocol stack 200 from the network 210 and/or pass
6 data down through the protocol stack 200 for transmission on the network 210. A typical
7 application layer 201 is the HyperText Transfer Protocol (HTTP).

8 Other upper layers 202 include any software modules that reside above the socket
9 layer 203. In this description and in the claims, an upper module being "above" a lower
10 module means that the upper module passes control over data to the lower module when
11 transmitting the data over the network. The socket layer 203 is responsible for establishing
12 a connection with other nodes over one or more networks. An example of a socket layer
13 includes Transmission Control Protocol (TCP) which, among other things, establishes
14 connections between two nodes in a network.

15 As long as processing unit 121 is, at any particular time, executing instructions of
16 the socket layer 203, the application layer 201, or at the other upper layers 202 above the
17 socket layer 203, the application program retains the ability to establish multiple
18 connections using a single communications device such as a modem or network interface
19 card. This is because the socket layer may, at that particular time, be used or called upon
20 to establish further connections even if connections are already established.

21 Lower layers 204 include those protocol layers that reside below the socket layer
22 203. Such layers might include, for example, the Internet Protocol (IP), and Point-to-Point
23 Protocol (PPP) upon which the Point-to-Point Tunneling Protocol (PPTP) is built. If the
24 processing unit 121, at any particular time, is executing instructions of any of the lower

1 layers 204 beneath the socket layer 203, the application program will not be able to
2 establish any further connections using a communications device already in use. This is
3 because the instruction will not access the socket layer 203 since the lower layers in
4 protocol stack are not typically designed to control upper layers in the protocol stack.

5 Figure 3 schematically illustrates a suitable network environment 300 in which the
6 present invention may operate. The environment includes a private corporate network 310
7 that resides within a public network 320.

8 In this description and in the claims, a “corporate network” is defined as a network
9 of computers that is maintained by an administrative entity. The term is not to be
10 interpreted as being limited to networks that are administered for a legal corporation
11 although the term is used because that is often the case. In this description and in the
12 claims, a “private corporate network” is defined as a corporate network that is used by a
13 limited number of authorized users. In order to attain reasonable assurance that the private
14 corporate network will only be used by authorized users, precautions are taken to guard
15 against unauthorized users accessing an internal resource or eavesdropping on network
16 traffic internal to the private corporate network. For this reason, the private corporate
17 network is typically isolated from the outside public network, except through certain
18 computers through which the public at large may not gain access.

19 For example, firewall 311 prevents the general public from accessing internal
20 resources (e.g., internal resources 315a and 315b) of the private corporate network 310. In
21 addition, a corporate network also typically includes a proxy server such as proxy server
22 312, which is designed to handle all requests (typically HTTP requests) from clients (e.g.,
23 clients 313a and 313b) internal to the private corporate network 310. The clients 313 may
24 each be structured as described above for computer 120 in Figure 1.

1 The firewall 311 is configured to deny any outgoing requests that do not originate
2 from the proxy server 312. Consequently all outgoing requests from the clients 313 are
3 made to the proxy server 312. The user requests includes the external Uniform Resource
4 Identifier (URI) for the external resource the user is interested in. However, the browser
5 client 313 is configured to send the request directly to the proxy server 312 with the
6 desired URI contained therein. After optionally checking that the browser client is
7 authorized to make the request, the proxy server 312 then generates a separate request to
8 the desired external resource on behalf of the browser client. The server that contains the
9 desired content (called an "origin server") then receives the request. From the origin
10 server's point of view, the proxy server 312 generated the request. The request does not
11 include any identifying information regarding the client 313 that requested the resource.
12 Thus, the proxy server 312 protects the identity of clients within the private corporate
13 network 310.

14 Thus, a proxy server is used by a private corporate network to serve as a channel
15 through which clients make outgoing access requests. In contrast, a "reverse proxy server"
16 is a resource that protects a single server or a group of load-balanced servers receiving
17 incoming access requests. Thus, a proxy server and a reverse proxy server perform
18 different and distinct functions in different environments. In this description and in the
19 claims, a "reverse proxy server" is not included within the definition of "proxy server."

20 The environment of Figure 3 also includes an external client 340 that is entirely
21 outside of the private corporate network 310 and is separated from the private corporate
22 network 310 through a public network 320 such as the Internet. Often, authorized users of
23 the private corporate network 310 may not have access to a browser client that is within the
24 private corporate network. For example, the authorized user may be at home, traveling, or

1 otherwise outside of the private corporate network. In this case, it is often desirable to
2 access internal resources 315 such as files or e-mail within the private corporate network
3 320.

4 As mentioned above, external clients currently establish a secure channel of
5 communication with the private corporate network using Point-to-Point Tunneling
6 Protocol (PPTP protocol). However, PPTP protocol is implemented below the socket layer
7 203 (in the lower layers 204) of the protocol stack 200. Thus, when the PPTP connection
8 is being implemented, the execution cannot call upon the socket layer 203 to establish
9 further connections for the network interface device. Therefore, once a PPTP connection
10 is established with the private corporate network using the network interface device in the
11 external client, the network interface device must transfer data only through the PPTP
12 connection.

13 To the extent that the external client has a secure channel of communication with
14 the private corporate network and must work through the private corporate network when a
15 PPTP channel is established, the PPTP channel forms a Virtual Privacy Network (VPN)
16 with the private corporate network. In other words, while the PPTP channel is established,
17 if the external client is to access another resource such as external resources 230 that are
18 also outside of the private corporate network 210, the communications are routed through
19 the private corporate network 210. The proxy server 212 then routes the request back out
20 to the desired external resources, just as the proxy server would do if the external client
21 240 was part of the private corporate network.

22 The present invention eliminates the restriction of the external client 340 having to
23 always work through the private corporate network 300 in order to access external
24 resources 230. Figure 4 illustrates a flowchart of a method for the communications device

1 of the external client 340 establishing a secure connection over the public network 320
2 with the private corporate network 310 (specifically, with the VPN access server 314).
3 The method is implemented without restricting the communications device (and associated
4 external client) to working through the private corporate network 310. Figure 3 and Figure
5 4 will be referred to frequently in describing the method of Figure 4.

6 Referring to Figure 4, embodiments within the scope of the present invention
7 include a step for securely connecting to the private corporate network 300 while retaining
8 the ability to establish a separate and distinct connection with another resource such as
9 external resource 230 outside of the private corporate network (step 410). An example of
10 corresponding acts that, when combined, produce the result of this step is now described
11 with reference to acts 420, 430, 440, and 450.

12 In act 420, the external client establishes a connection with a Virtual Privacy
13 Network (VPN) server 314 within the private corporate network. In this description and in
14 the claims, a "VPN" server is defined as a private corporate network server that facilitates
15 the establishment of a secure connection between the server and an external client outside
16 of the private corporate network. The external client establishes this connection using the
17 socket layer 203, which may be, for example, the TCP protocol. The VPN server 314 also
18 contains corresponding software (such as corresponding TCP protocol software) and
19 hardware that facilitates the establishment of the connection. The VPN server 314 may or
20 may not be implemented on the same server machine as the proxy server 312.

21 In act 430, the external client secures the connection 430. Connections may be
22 secured by conventional encryption/decryption crypts and by authentication methods. The
23 security of the connection is established by a protocol layer that is at or above the socket
24 layer 203 in the protocol stack 200. The security for the connection may be provided by

1 using Secured Socket Layer (SSL) protocol or Wireless Transport Layer Security (WTLS)
2 security. In act 440, the session corresponding to the connection is maintained potentially
3 by the same protocol that is used to establish the connection in the case of SSL or WTLS
4 protocols.

5 In act 450, the external client's ability to establish further connections is retained.
6 This may be accomplished by using a layer at or above the socket layer in order to
7 establish security between the external client and the private corporate network. SSL and
8 WTLS exist at or above the socket layer and, therefore, the SSL or WTLS layers may
9 implement the socket layer 203 to establish further connections.

10 In act 460, the external computer system does indeed establish further connections.
11 In one example, these connections are with external resources 330 outside of the private
12 corporate network, thereby allowing the external client the flexibility to communicate
13 directly with the external resource rather than channel communications to an external
14 resource through the private corporate network. This improves routing efficiency and
15 improves the efficiency and security of the private corporate network.

16 The use of protocols above the socket layer in the protocol stack is also
17 advantageous in that if the connection is lost, the session may be resumed without having
18 to go through all of the original communications needed to establish the connection in the
19 first place. Typically, the session state including any encryption/decryption keys would be
20 stored in memory and would persist despite a lost connection.

21 The present invention may be embodied in other specific forms without departing
22 from its spirit or essential characteristics. The described embodiments are to be considered
23 in all respects only as illustrative and not restrictive. The scope of the invention is,
24 therefore, indicated by the appended claims rather than by the foregoing description. All

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changes which come within the meaning and range of equivalency of the claims are to be embraced within their scope.

What is claimed and desired to be secured by United States Letters Patent is:

1 1. In a network environment that includes a public network such as the
2 Internet and a private corporate network contained in the public network, the public
3 network including a client external to the private corporate network, a method of a
4 communications device of the external client establishing a secure connection over a public
5 network to the private corporate network without restricting the communications device to
6 working through the private corporate network, the method comprising the following;

7 a specific act of the external client establishing a connection with the private
8 corporate network over the public network using the communication device;

9 a specific act of the external client providing security to the connection;

10 a specific act of the external client maintaining a session that uses the secure
11 connection to communicate with the private corporate network; and

12 during at least a portion of the specific act of the external client maintaining
13 a session that uses the secure connection, a specific act of the communication
14 device retaining the ability to establish a separate and distinct connection with
15 another resource outside of the private corporate network.

16
17 2. A method in accordance with Claim 1, further comprising:

18 during at least a portion of the specific act of the external client maintaining
19 a session that uses the secure connection, a specific act of establish a connection
20 with the resource outside of the private corporate network.

21
22 3. A method in accordance with Claim 1, wherein the specific act of the
23 external client establishing a connection with the private corporate network comprises:
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a specific act of using Transmission Control Protocol (TCP) to establish a connection with the private corporate network.

4. A method in accordance with Claim 3, wherein the specific act of the external client providing security to the connection comprises:

a specific act of the external client using a Secure Socket Layer (SSL) protocol to provide security to the connection.

5. A method in accordance with Claim 1, wherein the specific act of the external client providing security to the connection comprises:

a specific act of implementing a security protocol that resides at or above a socket layer in the protocol stack used to communicate data from the external client to the private corporate network.

6. A method in accordance with Claim 5, wherein the specific act of the external client providing security to the connection comprises:

a specific act of the external client using a Secure Socket Layer (SSL) protocol to provide security to the connection.

7. A method in accordance with Claim 5, wherein the specific act of the external client providing security to the connection comprises:

a specific act of the external client using a Wireless Transport Layer Security (WTLS) to provide security to the connection.